

Children's Playgrounds and Everyday City Life of Childhood

Alexandra Gennadyevna Filipova^a, Nadezhda Savvovna Syroed^a, and Svetlana Vladimirovna Goncharova^a

^aFar Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, RUSSIA

ABSTRACT

Play areas of entertainment and development are new recourses for modern city children, but at the same time, they produce risks of road traffic accidents, deviation, social inequality and social exclusion. Playgrounds in city/town yards are free zones of children's pastime, where children communicate and play together. The aim of this article is to consider children's playgrounds as semantic centers of town children's everyday life and to analyze their role in the social life of children of different age groups. Our research has made it possible to compare children's and adults' views on playgrounds. The position of parents is characterized by assessment of safety, variety of play equipment and developmental orientation. The importance of playgrounds for children is defined by possibilities of free communication and playing with other children.

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

In addition to strengthening of the methodological base of the "new" sociology of childhood, there was a "geographic change" in child sociology research in the 1990s and the 2000s that meant examining childhood in a certain geographic area. In 2003 an international scientific journal «Children's Geographies» began to be published, that contains empiric, theoretical, methodological and political works on various geographic worlds of children, young people and their families. Sociologists study children in town streets, communities, towns, regions and countries.

CORRESPONDENCE Alexandra Gennadyevna Filipova ✉ alexgen77@list.ru

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For studying childhood in town/city environment connection of physical and social, public and private areas is important (Goffman, Bourdieu). UNICEF, an international organization, introduced the concept of a town friendly to children, as a location, in which the needs and priorities of children are addressed.

I.Ward tries to answer the questions, why some children are isolated from the influence of towns where they live, and town streets, and why other children can use the space of towns and streets for their games and discoveries in his book "The child in the city" (Ward 1978). M.V. Osorina's book "The Secret World of Children in the Adult World" is a Russian interpretation of a town/city childhood. Children's experience of communication with the environment is presented by a wide range of places, from disorganized, "scary" and even dangerous (cemeteries, garbage dumps and cellars) to specially equipped rest and play territories (Osorina, 2000).

Russian researches view city/town life in the context of inequality of different social groups, including groups of children (Filipova, 2012; Naberushkina, 2011). Inequality leads to appearance of many child worlds, that do not have equal possibilities to use the resources of town environment. In extreme cases we see inequality in the form of social exclusion.

A yard (or the part of street territory or the plot of land next to a house) is an important concept in studying childhood. It is there that playgrounds, a semantic center of children's communication, are situated; using A.F. Filippov's term, we can call a playground "a knot of social relationships". Playgrounds become territories of child activity and creativity because of their freedom, openness, absence of control, and presence of entertaining and developing equipment.

Methodology

The aim of this research is considering playgrounds as semantic centers of everyday town life, analysis of their role in the social life of children of different age groups. We used the method of observation with photographing, non-standardized interviews for grown-ups and projective drawing methods for children. The children and adults that have taken part in our research live in cities, middle-sized towns and small towns in the Far East of Russia. Children of pre-school and junior school age were asked to draw their yard and answer the following questions: "How are you?", "What makes you sad?", "What makes you happy?", "Who are you in the yard with?" Four adult respondents are mentioned in the text: I 1 – Oxana, 40 years old (son, 11 years old); I 2 – Nadezhda, 45 years old (daughter, 12 years old); I 3 – Anna, 36 years old (son, 11 years old); I 4 – Elena, 30 years old (daughter, 10 years old).

Results

Describing playing areas for children, adults pay attention to the fact of the playground being near the house, the possibility to watch the child, looking through an apartment window, to absence of suspicious people, dogs, cars, and presence of trees, play equipment, safety coverings, etc.

Both adults and children view a playground as a space for little kids. Characterizing playgrounds, grown-ups pay attention to their redevelopment accomplished in the recent years. Many of them compare modern playgrounds with playgrounds of Soviet time, saying, that Soviet ones were brighter and



more functional. Children's drawings of yards are colorful and obviously attractive.

Comparing what parents and children say demonstrate characteristics of children's perception. Describing a playground, parents characterize it as "ordinary", "not extravagant" and enumerate traditional attractions for children: slides, swings, sandboxes; whereas children fantasize, describe their environment as colorful, add objects, unnoticed by adults: garages, fences, litterbins and heaps of sand; they name colors, which are absent in the stories of grown-ups.

Children describe their mood positively: "we are happy", "we are afraid of nothing". They spend their time with peers, who live next door. A playground becomes a semantic center of social interactions, when there are many children on it. Lonely children are bored even if the playground is the most modern.

Adult respondents are critical speaking about the quality of playgrounds, they are concerned about safety, absence of fences, about thoroughfares and cars, about lack of safety covering. Besides, parents notice, that play equipment often needs repairing: *It is good, of course that we have all these playgrounds now, but they are not always cared for (I 1).*

Adolescents also need areas for everyday active rest, because they do not always have time to go to the city center, to visit places of recreation and entertainment. But there are not so many non-institutional areas for adolescents. Adolescents have their characteristic needs: they need something unusual, interesting, not standard...

... A construction site... The building has no name; it is not finished... There are special places, for musicians, writers... They open new horizons to you, you climb them and you have new ideas...

(Liza, 15 years old).

Adults think that adolescents should have sports grounds and stadiums, and skating and hockey rinks, instead of playgrounds that are too childish for them.

When we talk to parents, they often mention thoroughfares. Open spaces are perceived by them as a source of external dangers to their children. Proximity of bus stops, crossroads, super- and hypermarkets makes yards overcrowded with strange people and cars.

I am afraid of leaving the child alone because of the thoroughfare... No yard here is enclosed, any stranger can take a child's hand and lead the child away (I 2).

Besides, one mother says it would be better *if there were surveillance cameras in public places, so that we could be sure that nobody would rob... And know what is happening, in general (I 3)*. In this case, cameras are a symbolic means of social control. They cannot help in emergency, but they can influence potentially dangerous people.

J. Jacobs, a Canadian and American researcher, comes to the conclusion that city parks and children's playgrounds are not safe, as they are "convenient" for criminal actions. She thinks, the reason is that risks are multiple in such places is, that there is no constant attention of passers-by to what is happening (Jacobs, 2011).

Nevertheless, many parents think that the territory of playgrounds is safer than many other town areas. A playground is the place where there are other children, mothers (grandmothers, other adult people) with little kids. It can be observed, it is often enclosed by a fence, it is near people's houses. That is why two mothers, participants of our research, say that they do not permit their children walk along in the city, but they would let them be alone on the playground.

The space of a playground often becomes the territory of a conflict between different age groups. Our informant gives this example of exclusion of junior schoolchildren from the space of playgrounds:

I remember that, when my toddler was learning to walk, I was always crying at those mad children, who ran about... That they should look under their feet... Now that my daughter is that age, 10, I see, that she has just nowhere else to go (I 4).

M.V. Osorina, a Russian researcher, gives us examples of her own observations at one of children's playgrounds, situated in the central square of St Petersburg, when mothers of little kids simply threw away girls of some 10 or 12 years of age. Grown-up people scold schoolchildren for climbing the roof of a slide, walk in a sandbox, jump from a swing, etc.

Besides the absence of a space for schoolchildren, a yard cannot satisfy other needs that are different from needs of the pre-school age. Schoolchildren want to test their physical abilities, demonstrate their strength and agility; they need unusual and interesting spaces, that is why they are attracted by abandoned houses, construction sites, cemeteries and garbage dumps.

Discussion

According to the parents' opinion, playgrounds should have characteristics of institutional spaces (schools or kindergartens) to be good leisure areas for children. These characteristics are settled limits, socially responsible adult people, social control (cameras), etc.

In comparison with the largest cities, towns and cities of the Russian Far East don't have sufficient financial resources for building big play complexes for children, and sometimes it is also difficult to do because the land is hilly (as in Vladivostok or Khabarovsk). Instead of visiting such complexes, children wander, visiting playgrounds in nearby yards. *When we were tired of the same playground, we could visit other ones, though our choice was not big. (I 1).*

Playgrounds should offer new playing equipment to make such visits interesting.

Children's playgrounds can become a part of more spacious public areas, being situated in parks, squares or pedestrian zones. In this case a synthesis of adult and children's areas would appear, that would, as one mother of a young child said, "permit each person to decide, what to do there", and overcome conflicts of interests of different age groups of children.

Revealing the secret of an effective public space, Y.A. Panov writes, "It is the main thing: many people and much liveliness. Children play on numerous and various playgrounds. Adults ride bicycles, walk, sit on the grass and on different benches in parks, squares, on river banks, looking at other people and at the water" (*SAGA o gorode ...2014: 20*). On the one hand, mixed zones for



adults and children give parents the possibility to realize social control, and, on the other hand, they give an opportunity for common leisure of adults and children.

The principle of zoning can be an example of effective playgrounds both for pre-school and school-age children. There is a zone for little children with a traditional sandbox, a little slide and a swing, and a larger space for schoolchildren with equipment for climbing, a variety of slides and swings, exercise equipment and a table for tennis. Naturally, organizing such complexes demands large areas, possibly far from highways, surrounded by trees.

Moscow Region governor's initiative of building areas and playgrounds for children can be an illustration. Article 12 of the law "Development of Moscow Region" there is a definition of a children's playground as a place for children of all age groups – younger pre-school (under 3), pre-school (under 7), younger and middle school age (7 – 12) and teenagers (12 – 16). It is noted, that it can be organized in the form of separate playgrounds for different age groups or in the form of complex playgrounds with zoning according to the interests of different age groups.

Conclusion

Playgrounds for children have become an illustration of a town caring for children. Being bright, colorful and new, they make a town look more beautiful, they become a symbol of amicability. But once having spent money and organized such areas, we shall not have the desirable effect. Play areas need constant care: paint peels off, swings break, sand disappears from sandboxes, etc. Play complexes need not only constant repair, but also changing of the equipment.

At the same time, playgrounds, as the only suitable space in yards, become a place of confrontation, on the one hand, of different age groups of children, on the other hand, of dog owners, companies "suspicious" people, car drivers. This, naturally, influences the condition of playgrounds, their being comfortable and safe for the children who play on them.

Children's playgrounds are important for organizing playing activities: not only for pre-school, but also for schoolchildren. Younger schoolchildren do not walk in the town as free, as adolescents do. Gradually moving forward from pre-school to school childhood, a child learns his/her city: first, the yard, then his/her district, the center, the other districts. The world of visits and interactions gradually becomes wider. In the process of learning the city a teenager begins to use public transport, be oriented in the space of the city, cross streets, plan his/her walking route, avoid dangerous places, etc.

A playground, as a semantic center of a child's activities, plays an important role in child and adult-child interactions, in development of physical abilities of children (strength, skills, endurance, etc.), satisfying their need to play, mastering social roles, etc.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Alexandra Gennadyevna Filipova holds a PhD in science education and now is a professor at Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia.

Nadezhda Savvovna Syroed holds a PhD in science education and now is a professor at Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia.

Svetlana Vladimirovna Goncharova holds a PhD in science education and now is a professor at Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia.

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